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## THE GENESIS OF FREEDOM OF WILL AND ACTION.

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THE central problem of ethical theory still remains that of free will and self-determined action, although in spheres beyond ethics itself the general direction of recent thought has on the whole added to its difficulties; no longer is it possible almost indisputably to appeal to a vital force in biology, or in psychology to the soul; here, as in phenomena purely physical, science has not ceased its revelation of necessary and invariant law. The result is the maintenance, if anything with greater emphasis, of the familiar antithesis in all its absoluteness; and just as Kant postulated a moral freedom which was noumenal and ideal, so Bergson, *e.g.*, turns to an "indetermination" wholly opposed to the mechanicalism of intellect.

But in adhering to these methods philosophical ethics is in truth but stultifying itself; for, consciously or unconsciously, it is thereby committed to an irreconcilable dualism, and must surrender once for all any ideal of a *universe*, thus becoming a cult of mere miracle or even magic;—the ultimate activity which is Reality is regarded as manifesting itself in ways not merely different, but fundamentally contradictory, and the only relevant Philosophy becomes then some type of mysticism.

Such a development, however, is by no means inevitable; for, just as the material universe contains within its dynamic mechanism all the conditions necessary to processes truly vital and organic, exactly so does the further stage—the evolution of consciousness—itsself provide the basis—

the necessary basis, if the paradox be permitted—of true freedom. If we compare, that is, the essential characteristics of the preconscious material world with those of the universe in which consciousness is operative, we shall find that there is nothing whatever in spiritual freedom that is mysterious or unintelligible, but that on the contrary it is simply the rational outcome of all the known precedent conditions, and that no other result is possible or conceivable.

We are compelled, it is true, to postulate here the *origin* of consciousness, which itself still eludes explanation; but the question of its origin is after all irrelevant, and we have but to consider the fundamental differences which its advent created—the essentials of the contrast between the two worlds of unconscious objects and of conscious beings. This contrast can be properly comprehended, however, only when these are regarded dynamically, not statically—in terms that is of the stimuli received from the environment, and the responses thereto, in each of these two categories respectively. The presence of consciousness certainly connotes an immense advance in physical organisation; but consciousness and its correlative organic basis must be apprehended in their only true relation, in which bodily organisation is subservient to mind; in this respect we are too apt to be unduly impressed by the marvellous complexity of living matter when compared with the apparently simple nature of primal psychological processes; but this is to put cart before horse, for nervous systems are but means, while consciousness is the true end.

I. In order then to compare the reactions of the purely material environment, before the advent of consciousness, with the conditions which followed its development, the world of matter and its phenomena must be dichotomised into the subdivisions of physical and physiological;<sup>1</sup> in each

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<sup>1</sup> I by no means intend, however, to distinguish these absolutely from each other; on the contrary I hold them to be essentially continuous; roughly then, and excluding consciousness, the distinction is between living and non-living, "physical" being used in its widest sense to include chemical and electrical changes, etc.

of which every individual is (first) a systematic structure, and (secondly) a contributory element within a system wider than itself, whence it incessantly receives stimuli to which it must in some way respond;<sup>2</sup> the principal difference between the physical and physiological realms then being the greater complexity of both the individuals and (as a result) the response to stimuli in the latter.

But as compared with the physical, this higher complexity of the physiological subdivision is connected with a far smaller number of individuals having a much more restricted distribution both in time and in space. In purely physical phenomena again, the limits of diversity are relatively narrow, so that the processes, while universal in their distribution, are simple in character; physiological changes, on the other hand, though more complex, are relatively very limited in their extent and duration. The result is that in both divisions alike, although from quite different causes, the range of action taken as a whole attains but narrow limits of variation—in the physical world because their universality is counterbalanced by simplicity of organisation, and in the physiological because complexity is compensated by restricted distribution in time and space; and thus, unless some wholly new factor intervenes which can combine universality with a high complexity, any further development becomes impossible.

II. Exactly the same conclusion follows if the phenomena are considered from a somewhat different standpoint: If we now take into account not the relative complexity of the two subdivisions but the character of the stimuli to which the constitutive individuals respond. The simple physical object in the first place is susceptible to very many physical stimuli;<sup>3</sup> but every advance in complexity necessitates a heightened selectiveness of response—the fewer, therefore, become the external influences which can affect the character of the system, *as a system*. The result is the higher degree

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<sup>2</sup> It may be pointed out that conditions of stable equilibrium form no exception, for this is maintained only while the requisite stimuli continue to act.

<sup>3</sup> But as already noted all states of stable equilibrium must be included here.

of specialisation characteristic of all complex organisations, which are excellently adapted each to its own special environment, but unresponsive (so far as its specific character is concerned) to all influences beyond that; perhaps a sufficient illustration is the narrow groove into which every expert of necessity falls; and thus once more it is obvious that development must reach an early climax which cannot be transcended apart from the operation of some entirely new agency capable of combining further complexity with an *increase* in the number and frequency of stimuli.

Still another characteristic of the preconscious world must be noted. When several stimuli, all in the same category or of one order,<sup>4</sup> influence a system simultaneously, they become compounded into a resultant, to which, and not to the several stimuli as separate, the individual responds. There is here no possibility whatever of isolating the several stimuli (of any one order) from each other; no possibility, therefore, of any discrimination between them on the part of the system affected, which can respond only to the complex influence of all the stimuli acting together; there is thus what may be called a concentration or summation of stimuli, instead of their multiplication and differentiation.

III. Having thus determined the distinctive characteristics of the mechanical universe from which consciousness was absent, it becomes possible to comprehend the fundamental change which the development of an advanced intelligence brought about. The origin of consciousness (to repeat) remains unintelligible; its earlier stages also, prior, *i.e.*, to the evolution of perception and idealisation, concern us but indirectly; so that we may take up our problem at that stage when a developed practical intellect has begun to function, but apart from the appearance of any moral faculty, and therefore of moral freedom in the proper sense of the word. At this point, however, it becomes necessary to determine very definitely our general

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<sup>4</sup> Light, heat, gravity, electric and chemical action, etc., are here regarded as different categories or orders of physical phenomena.

position; for it is as a matter of fact quite impossible thus to draw any *absolute* line of distinction, before which the moral sense is completely absent, and after which it becomes plainly distinguishable. On the contrary, the dawn of the moral judgment coincides, as in all other evolution, with the later stages of earlier functions lower than itself in importance and value; there is no point therefore where we can say with absolute definiteness—Here morality begins, and there it is totally absent. Indeed, it is the principal aim of my treatment of the question to show the inconceivability of any such hard and fast distinction, and to trace the path by which developed rationality comes to necessitate ethical freedom. But at the same time it is perfectly legitimate, if only we bear this principle in mind, to make an abstraction here, in order to consider the functions of the practical intelligence alone and apart from any connexion with morality.

The first difference then that a developed intelligence makes is that the environment now acts in its individuality, instead of merely (as in the unconscious realm) as a totality; which means that the different constituents of the environment affect the intelligent being *as individuals*, instead of merely through the resultant compounded from their several stimuli; which (as has been seen) was the only possible method in the material world. For to perceive is essentially to individualise—to isolate an element from the surrounding totality and to apprehend it in its relations to that totality; and thus (further) to enable it to act in its own nature apart from every other individual—to exercise its special influence independently therefore, instead of being subsumed in a mere resultant.

Perception, in other words, implies that there are as many potential stimuli as there are different objects<sup>5</sup> within any one sphere of consciousness; indeed, every aspect and property which can be separately perceived becomes a stim-

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<sup>5</sup> "Object" here may be taken either (1) in its ordinary meaning of "thing," or, preferably, (2) in its wider meaning to denote every object of knowledge or thought, *i.e.*, in its epistemological significance.

ulus on due occasion.<sup>6</sup> Under these circumstances then, instead of the increased complexity involving a more restricted specialisation (as was the case in the preconscious world), intelligence, while associated with individuals much more highly differentiated both physiologically and mentally, at the same time brings to its maximum the number of stimuli capable of affecting them; and thus the first result of this higher complexity is a vast *increase* in the number of separate stimuli: not, as in the material world, a reduction and concentration of stimuli.

But still further, the presentation of objects to consciousness, either in their entirety or as differentiated into their diverse attributes and properties, is usually but transient; one and the same object, *i.e.*, may enter repeatedly into a percipient consciousness, and present now one aspect and again another; so that not only is the number of different stimuli increased, but the *frequency* of each also.

But it will be recalled that in the material world, from which consciousness was absent, the developmental process taken as a whole reached an early limit because of the inherent impossibility of combining more complex organisation with a greater number and a higher frequency of stimuli. This fatal obstacle is, however, removed entirely by the evolution of consciousness; the possibilities of development are thus widened enormously by the activity of simple perception alone; and when, from this as a basis, there arises the still higher world of ideas and imagination the limits which restrict advance are removed to the remotest bounds. For when it is fully perceived an object acquires a meaning, and it then acts not only in its own being but also through what it implies; so that a thing may be very trivial in its simple physical existence and yet may become highly effective because of what it signifies; one may instance the warning and protective colours of organisms; there arises as it were a true psychical *actio in distans*; objects become more important in their intrinsic nature

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<sup>6</sup> In this respect natural selection would obviously play a most important rôle during the evolution of consciousness.

than in their extrinsic relations—*what* they are is of much more significance than *where* they are.

IV. It is obvious, however, that these changed conditions do not in themselves constitute any explanation of the nature and genesis of freedom; to heighten complexity and increase the number and frequency of stimuli does not necessarily transform the determinism of the material world into spiritual freedom; for even an infinite number of stimuli may still act purely mechanically. Still another factor, therefore, must now be taken into consideration—a factor which is an additional consequence of that separate activity of the environmental elements which results from the rise of consciousness.

It is usual for psychology to consider perception principally with reference to the conscious subject; but when it is interpreted in terms of the environment—*i.e.*, of the psychological “object” taken *in toto*—perception means analysis—individualisation. The physical world, instead of affecting the perceiving subject as one whole whose many stimuli are concentrated into a few resultant forces, is now grasped in its true diversity, each element revealing itself and operating within the conscious sphere in its own specific nature.<sup>7</sup> Thus instead of being absorbed, each constituent exists and acts separately; and if now we combine this condition with our previous result of the vastly increased frequency and number of stimuli, and consider the character of the reactions of the conscious subject, it will become obvious that these must more and more take on the nature of free, instead of mechanically determined, action.

For every increase in the total number of stimuli thus attained must cause the inequalities of their effects to tend gradually towards a vanishing point, while stimuli which are repeated would still further tend to equality; but where so large a number of influences thus nearly or absolutely

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<sup>7</sup> I may anticipate criticism by saying that this is absolutely true only as an ideal condition which is never more than partially realised, though it is more and more nearly attained with the advance of consciousness.



equal act simultaneously and separately, as they do in perception, any decisive and well marked response on the part of the conscious subject must be obviously extremely difficult, if not indeed impossible; exactly as in the physical world such a set of conditions tends of itself to produce stable equilibrium, which plainly means the absence of any responsive activity; and though such a result is easily attainable under purely material conditions, it is wholly impossible for the conscious individual; urged on as he always is by the desires and fears of his own inner nature, action of some kind is an imperative necessity. To which, therefore, of the innumerable stimuli seeking to affect him he will respond must now depend not on themselves alone but primarily on his reflective selection of some, and rejection of others—in other words on his own deliberate choice from the existent total. Thus the conscious choice of selected stimuli gradually comes to replace their previous mechanical mass action, and the influences which are rendered ineffective are now inhibited, not only as in the physical world by others like themselves external, but mainly by the very individual upon which they seek to act.

The activity of the conscious subject then has thus acquired freedom from external determination; but what is the nature of this new attribute? It is most emphatically not freedom *from* stimuli, but freedom *within* stimuli; not an escape from *all* determination, but the selection of *its own* determinants; not, therefore, action wholly without cause, but action sequent upon one cause rather than another which *prima facie*—apart, *i.e.*, from the subject's own choice—equals it in energy.

It is this which gives us our mystifying sense of inner freedom combined with outer restraint; for instinctively and unthinkingly we constantly seek an impossible freedom from all external influences when all that we can ever secure is freedom within them; we demand an absolute dominance over the external world instead of being content with submission to inner ideals. Hence, too, the difficulty of ascertaining by mere uncritical introspection whether action is

really free or not; for our simple unanalysed feeling is inextricably compounded of the consciousness of being passively influenced by stimuli, together with the absolute necessity, if we are to act at all, of choosing between them; we forget that in such a delicately balanced complex as is the conscious subject, incessantly assaulted by countless stimuli all so nearly equal as almost to neutralise one another, decisive action must be impossible until we freely choose and determine its direction; and in those weak natures which have but little power of choice, action at once reverts to what it was in the physical world—the vacillating and inconstant resultant of stimuli acting apart from any selection and consequent reinforcement from within the person himself;<sup>8</sup> he becomes a log drifting with the current, instead of swimming strongly against it.

V. It may still be argued, however, that this view of the function of consciousness does not after all affect the essential principle of the question, because the responsive voluntary act remains still a resultant, and cannot, therefore, be wholly and completely free; and in so far as it insists on the existence of a resultant, and, therefore, of some measure at least of determination, this objection is valid. But the whole issue depends, not on the resultant as such, but rather on the factors producing it; and not on the mere presence or absence of determination in itself, so much as on the *nature* of the determination, whose existence is not denied. And from the dawn of perception to the highest spiritual level, the responsive subject itself becomes continuously a more and more important agent in determining the resultant action, which further implies that the determination, which always exists and is, indeed, positively necessary, gradually acquires a totally new character and basis; it becomes less and less determination from without, more and more determination from within, the active individual himself. There occurs, *i.e.*, a slow but radical transposition of the contributions to the final result made by the environment and by the conscious

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<sup>8</sup> The constant tremor of a compass is a good physical example.

subject respectively; at first the latter is little more than a passive element in a mechanically acting whole—a small cog in a great machine; but at the end of the process the active individual has become predominantly directive of itself, and the environment, though still an indispensable factor, of but secondary importance and value.

Finally, it is essential to recognise that the freedom whose generation out of mechanism has here been traced is of a perfectly general character, and lacks as yet those special attributes which distinguish aesthetic, rational, and moral freedom respectively. But to restrict freedom to the moral world is a serious error in principle, and hampers our apprehension of its problems; for just as organic evolution proceeds simultaneously, though independently, in both plant and animal kingdoms, so spiritual development takes place on the rational, aesthetic and moral planes together; but the connexion and distinction between these its diverse manifestations constitutes a problem separate from the evolution of freedom in itself.

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